

Too nice to be president?

By Louise Sweeney

Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

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Texas Republican George Bush is often accused of being too nice, too decent to be president — as if niceness were a tragic flaw like mad ambition.

"I still believe an individual can make a difference," he says in the faintly raspy voice that smacks of both the East, where he was raised, and Texas, where he made his fortune. "I'm an idealist, not a cynic. I've been blessed by a father who inculcated into his sons and daughters a sense of service, been blessed by a good education [Phillips Academy, B.S. in economics from Yale (Phi Beta Kappa)] a chance to serve my country in combat [youngest pilot in the Navy, World War II], opportunity to build a successful business, [co-founder of three independent oil firms], a chance to serve in the United States Congress [two terms in the House as representative from Texas' seventh district] and serve in diplomacy [UN ambassador, liaison chief to the People's Republic of China] and national security [CIA director] in three challenging jobs. And I was chairman of the party ['73 to '74, during the Watergate storm].

"So I've had a breadth of experience that convinces me I know I can do the job.... I've taken a lot out of this system, and I want to put it back in, in the highest job there is.... I've been a leader, done tough jobs, made tough decisions, so to the degree that anybody is qualified through experience, through conviction, I am.

One of the men who's worked as his manager of operations with George Bush all over the world — Venezuela, India, the Persian Gulf — is Carl Johnson Sr., now a Texas drilling consultant. Mr. Johnson, reached by radio phone as he works on a well in the Gulf of Mexico, says Bush is "very cool in a crisis operation. He takes time to think it out before

he goes about whatever has to be done." He calls George Bush "fair, a good man, who's worked hard all his life."

He has also taken on the challenges other people might have dodged — the chairmanship of the Republican Party during the Watergate scandal, which he deplored and emerged from untarnished — and the directorship of the CIA during the period of reform which followed the public outcry over its abuses.

But that very job raises the question of whether a man who has been head of the CIA can hope to be elected president.

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Scholars," and director of studies at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, says. "My impression from lecturing is that it is no longer a block to the presidency to have been head of the CIA.... The trend for four years was to beat up the CIA and anyone connected with it. That has turned around. He was a reform CIA director and a successful one."

In his book Dr. Cline, former deputy director of the CIA, speaks of Bush's "competent and energetic efforts. Under him CIA morale improved and public confidence increased." Even the head of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Sen. Daniel Inouye (D) of Hawaii, called him "one of the best CIA directors we've had."

Still, the shadow of being former chief spook of the CIA, with the suspicions and fears that arouses in some of the public, persists in terms of the presidency. Does George Bush himself see it as a handicap or possibly an asset?

"To fair-minded people it would clearly be an asset.... The mission of the CIA is important, people are worried about nuclear proliferation, illegal drug traffic, terrorism around the world, verification of the SALT treaties, all these things, just keeping the president informed. These are important things, and a strong intelligence capability is essential. So to the degree people are thinking people, having been associated with that mission would be good....

"I was there one year after the alleged abuses and the actual abuses took place. I helped draft the executive order that guaranteed abuses in the past would not repeat themselves.... I testified very openly before Congress and, generally speaking, emerged with my own integrity intact and with respect....

"I have innate confidence in the fairness of the American people. If someone just says, 'Oh he was CIA. He must be bad,' there's nothing you can do about that.... It doesn't matter whether it's good politics or not. It's part of my background.... I know I served honorably and can project that to people, except for a handful... who are prejudiced."

He sums up on the CIA: "Some of the things in an open society must be closed."

EXCERPTS